

Article appeared
on page A-2

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FBI Asked to Probe Leak on Listening Post in Norway

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The FBI has been asked to begin an investigation of what the U.S. intelligence community considers a very damaging leak about the use of a listening post in Norway to help verify Soviet compliance with the SALT II treaty.

Administration sources said yesterday that Stansfield Turner, director of the CIA, made the request to Attorney General Griffin B. Bell on June 26. That same day a New York Times article disclosed that the site in Norway was being considered as a way to replace listening posts in Iran and U2 flights over Turkey as a verification tool.

The leak about the Norway site was the latest in a series of disclosures during the escalating debate on the strategic arms limitations treaty.

The latest disclosure of classified information is considered especially damaging, intelligence sources said, because so few persons had access to it and it led to a barrage of Soviet criticism toward Norway, which could endanger the future of the facilities and their expansion.

The leak to Times reporter Richard Burt was also embarrassing because it came just a few months after Vice President Mondale had told Norwegian officials during a state visit to Oslo that the secret would be protected, one source said.

"The intelligence bosses were screaming, hopping mad," one official said of the disclosure. "No wonder other governments ask whether we can protect information about their cooperation with us."

Despite the high-level outrage at the leak, other officials said it wasn't likely that the leaker would ever be prosecuted, even if discovered. "The agencies never want to declassify the relevant documents for use at trial," one expert in the field said.

The grounds for investigation would be possible violation of the espionage statute barring unauthorized disclosure of classified communications intelligence.

The first step in an FBI investigation of a national security leak normally is to send the complaining agency a letter asking for answers to what are known as "the 11 questions."

These include a verification that the disclosed material was properly classified, a statement of how many persons had access to it and whether the agency is willing to make the material public at a trial.

A Senate study of such investigations last year showed that only three of 30 recent leak cases were ever referred to Justice and that none of those was pursued after the 11 questions were answered.

One intelligence official said that, in recent months, the number of requests for criminal investigations has increased. Lately, the key question of whether the agency is willing to declassify the documents needed for prosecution has not been stressed.

One official acknowledged that the goal of such investigations isn't prosecution as much as deterrence.

It is just that knowledge that has made the Justice Department and FBI reluctant to get involved in these cases, "The intelligence agencies just want us to do their dirty work for them," one Justice official said.

Another Justice official expressed concern that the continuing debate on the SALT treaty will lead to more leaks of classified information. This is because one of the most contentious issues in the debate, verification of Soviet compliance, centers on some of the nation's most tightly guarded secrets, satellites and U.S. electronic intercept stations in other countries, he said.

In April, Times reporter Burt wrote an article about plans to use U2 flights from bases in Turkey as part of the verification process. That classified disclosure led to a political controversy in Turkey that has threatened that plan.

And Sen. Jake Garn (R-Utah), a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, complained publicly that the administration was leaking such information to defend its pro-SALT position.

One intelligence official said yesterday that the disclosure about Turkey worried the Norwegians and led to Mondale's personal assurances in April that the same thing wouldn't happen to them.

"You can imagine how nervous our allies in the intelligence business are getting," the official said.